

Jeremy Tambling, *Dickens' Novels as Poetry: Allegory and Literature of the City*. New York and London: Routledge (Routledge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature, 13), 2015. Pp. viii + 238. \$145.00; £90.00.

Jeremy Tambling opens *Dickens' Novels as Poetry* in the preface-less form we have come to expect from him – in *mediis res*, and with two fragmented sentences: “*Dombey and Son* (1846–8) to begin with, and poetry of the city. First, the construction of the railway, rendering former squalor in two, in a ‘wild’ natural process” (2). His introductory thoughts at once recall the rhetorical urgency already witnessed in *Dickens, Violence and the Modern State* (1995) and *Going Army: Dickens and London* (2008). And, at the same time, they strike immediately to the core of his current subject, particularly as this passage mirrors the opening of *A Christmas Carol* – “Marley was dead: to begin with” – which Tambling reads as a foreshadowing of the dead man’s revenant return (117). We begin in the middle of things, this study suggests, because there is no beginning, no singular origin or truth; because doing so yields the familiar uncannily foreign (and vice versa); and because speech should be understood, from the very outset, as shadow-play. The richly unsettling effect of this critical approach underscores the central argument of Tambling’s book: that the poetic language in Dickens, which emerges through various forms of allegory in the novels (dreams, jokes, riddles, fevers, hallucinations, caricatures, slips of the tongue, everyday language), prevents the narrative articulation of a “socialised, unified self” (20). Tambling follows Walter Benjamin in identifying allegory as “precisely that which shows what cannot be reconciled into a system of thought” (23) – or, as Tambling writes elsewhere, that which is beyond, underneath, “shifting, enigmatic, distorted” (60), and ultimately representative of what Freud calls the “primary process.”

Dickens' Novels as Poetry reads as a scintillating conversation with a scholar markedly attuned to the peculiar rhythms and unconscious ties that distinguish the Dickens canon. The analysis is dense, sharp, and demanding, and by the end of the book I feel as though, by some brilliant trick, I have just re-read all the novels in the space of two-hundred pages, and with a newly re-ordered attention to their poetics of dissolution. I am still not sure if I must call Dickens a poet (as opposed to, say, a poetic novelist) in order to appreciate the allegorical pulse of his writing – but, in fact, this distinction does not seem finally to be the point. Readers should not expect to find a lengthy literature review here (past scholarship on Dickens-as-poet is barely mentioned); and Tambling offers no thoroughgoing delineation of his own uses of the terms “prose” and “poetry” until one-third of the way into the book, when a few key lines from Heidegger and T. S. Eliot are invoked (75–6). What readers should expect is a lively and exhaustive

post-structuralist analysis of the tension between intelligibility (associated with prose) and groundlessness (with poetry) in Dickens’s language. They should look for this analysis to proceed with a discursive virtuosity that moves fluidly between impressively broad contextual readings (inter-novelistic, inter-generational, inter-generic) and painstakingly close attention to form (down to the very letter); and they should anticipate that Tambling, in ultra-deconstructive mode, often *shows* rather than *tells* – or, to use the language of the book itself, *says without saying*. Throughout, Tambling provides explosive clusters of names, ideas, and images that call upon the reader – just as he claims Dickens does – to perform the “imaginary work” of supplying the often-unstated effect of the grouping (48, 50). Tambling uses the term “rend” to characterize allegory in Dickens (cited above): I would use it to describe Tambling’s own writing, which thrives on excess, as well as on the absences and disconnections that grow up organically amongst the accumulated materials of his research. This approach is at once stimulating and disorienting, as the labyrinthine associations drawn by the book can be difficult to parse – deliberately, meta-critically so, I think. Familiarity with Freud, Lacan, Heidegger and Benjamin (as well as Adorno, Hegel, and Levinas, to a lesser extent) is a requirement, as is some knowledge of the great romes of English literature (throughout, for instance, Tambling connects Dickens with Joyce and Shakespeare – *Hamlet*, especially).

Part I (“Writing Styles: Romantic and Baroque”) serves two primary purposes: first, it makes a case for Dickens as a well-informed and deeply allusive writer, who draws frequently – if casually, almost imperceptibly, at times – on English literary history; and, second, it claims that Dickens inherits from the baroque tradition of the previous generation the use of caricature, which takes its most distilled form in the novels in the figure of Quilp. The first chapter in this section will be of indispensable interest to those wanting to ascertain what Dickens had on his bookshelf, and to track moments in the novels when those other books make appearances, emerging often in faint, ghostly form as evidence of a literary unconscious in Dickens. Tambling writes here in response to the oft-cited 1872 review by G. H. Lewes that remarked upon the startling thinness of the author’s personal library; while Tambling concedes that Dickens did possess the philistine insularity of his age, he argues that the author possessed an uncanny “urban awareness” (32) and, indeed, revealed a sharp attentiveness to precisely those cultural phenomena – higher literature, especially – that Lewes had reported him to lack. Most compelling for me in this section are the connections Tambling draws between Dickens and the Romantics: the material on Wordsworth, *Bleak House*, and meta-poetics is especially provocative (33 – 7). The material on Quilp in chapter 3 will be useful to those tracing monstrosity in Dickens; the significant contribution Tambling makes to this discussion

is the alignment – through the lens of Freud, Benjamin, Lacan and Adorno – of the grotesque with allegory.

Part II ("Poetry and the City") and Part III ("Opening Words") deal explicitly with father-son relations and the element of narrative chronology most closely associated with them: the beginning of the story – i. e., the *pater*, the origin, the present that becomes (or already is) the past. The first two chapters draw on Lacan to interpret a poetry of absence in the early novels, in which urban types (Jingle, Weller, Mrs. Gamp, Young Bailey) "bring out the deficiency in all language" through their uses of jokes, non-sequiturs, and empty braggart speech (91). Tambling then shows how son-figures in subsequent novels are themselves marks of absence or deficiency: David Copperfield, like Pip and Paul Dombey, is said to be "a compound of himself and his father ... de-centered since he cannot know that other self, whose name authorises him but is narcissitic too" (124). This argument builds to a striking interpretation of autobiography in Dickens as a generic expression of the filial state – most notably, the filial state of the author himself, whose own need to self-identify in the space of the missing father, Tambling claims, underscores all other utterances of loss in the novels. Most interesting to me in these two parts is the abbreviated but arresting focus on women in Dickens, who function even more essentially than the men as signs of groundlessness, fragmentation, unmaking: ghostly mothers, emotionally-stunted spinsters, aunts with unusual influence, and macabre sister-figures, all of whom are shown to dwell in the "land of dreams and shadows" (126). Tambling's review of these characters culminates in a close look at the composite figure of Esther Summerson, at once sister and narrator, whose autobiographical writing reveals most conspicuously how the unconscious self – and its associations with loss, distortion, and otherness – "cannot be kept out" (127).

Part IV ("Dickens and the Poetry of Dreams") reads dream imagery in the novels (waking-states in *Oliver Twist*, tempestuous memories in *David Copperfield*, and drug-induced doubling in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*) as iterations of a drive towards trauma, death, and humor – and thus towards the sublimated self: it-like, figural, condensed, distorted. Much as Benjamin talks about the arcades as conduits to an urban underworld, Tambling interprets dreams in Dickens as portals into the writerly unconscious – which, in turn, represents the mythic aspect of the nineteenth-century city and the destructive (death-driven) anxieties and desires of its bourgeois culture (183). This section witnesses a return to considerations of Dickens and hallucination (already explored briefly in Part I), with extended research into mesmerism, hypnosis and *dédoublement*: these border states of consciousness, Tambling writes, "sever the subject from his or her history and make rational prose rethink itself from its commitment to describing things sequentially, giving

space to the instantaneity of what is plural" (187). The discussion of *David Copperfield* in chapter 13 is astutely compelling, as it suggests – through scrutiny of the tempest that kills Steerforth and Ham – the Kurtzian horror (indeed, the murderous violence) of self-identification. This, Tambling links to the terrible power of the *ilya* (citing Levinas) to mark what is indefinable and partial in reality, and in the language that confers it (198). I leave this book equal-parts persuaded and haunted by one of Tambling's concluding remarks on Dickens's writing – that it "can be magnificently unsure of itself because it knows the self as double" and that, precisely in this knowledge, in this uncertainty, we find its poetry (189).

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Mary L. Shannon. *Dickens, Reynolds, and Mayhew on Wellington Street. The Print Culture of a Victorian Street*. "The Nineteenth Century Series." Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2015. Pp. xvi + 262. \$90.00; £65.00.

"I am of the streets, streety," confides George Augustus Sala in "Down Whitechapel Way," rejoicing in his journalistic rather than poetic streak; "I love to take long walks, not only down Fleet Street, but up and down all other streets, alleys, and lanes" (*Household Words*, November 1851, 126).¹ Most successful journalists, one might surmise, are and have been urban creatures, whether strolling with Benjamin's *flâneur* on the boulevards of the era of high capitalism, or making forays over the border into the slums and ghettos of "the poor man's country," in Thackeray's cosmopolitan phrasing. The metaphorical and metonymic connections between streets and the literature of the nineteenth century have been articulated with great insight and skill by critics in the years since Walter Bagelhor first likened London to a newspaper, and Dickens to its special correspondent for posterity.² But journalists need editors, and editors cannot always be patrolling the streets; editors need offices to arrive at, work and sleep in, depart from, both early and late, yet much less attention has been paid to these connections by commentators, whether such offices

1 Anon. [George Augustus Sala], "Down Whitechapel Way," *Household Words* 4 (Nov. 1851) 126–31; 126.

2 Cf. Bagelhor's review of the "Cheap Edition" of Dickens's fictional works up to 1858, "Charles Dickens," *National Review* 7 (Oct. 1858), 458–86; see Shannon's "Conclusion" (213–17) for a discussion of its resonance.